

It's Fun to See Again

BOND, F. FRASER

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Strictly Personal

IT'S FUN TO SEE AGAIN

EDITOR'S NOTE: F. Fraser Bond, author of "Mr. Miller of 'The Times'," "Breaking Into Print," etc., had his career halted in midstream by cataract. In this article he tells of his adventures as a working writer in a "personal dimout." His story has a happy ending—he is now a "seeing" writer once more, and is teaching courses in journalism at New York University.

WHAT makes it fun to see again after living in the dark for many years? Chiefly the unexpected interest and excitement of simple things which I had almost forgotten: the colors of the furniture in my apartment; the patterns made by the grain of the wood in hard-wood floors; the crinkly laughter lines around the eyes and mouths of friends; the tracery of branches against the sky; the brightness of advertising cards in buses and subways; the incredible hats which women wear and the incredible angles at which they wear them.

It's fun even to recall my difficulties in getting around. In New York, with its precise traffic regulations, I used to employ a zig-zag pattern. With east-bound traffic running on even-numbered streets and west-bound traffic on off-numbered streets, I could always arrange my route so that I crossed a street directly in front of the halted cars. Even if the green light flashed on while I was in midstream, I figured that the drivers would hardly risk the delay and mess involved in deliberately running me down.

Of course, I often bumped into people. They accepted my apologies good-humoredly and, usually as a sequel to our headlong meeting, helped me across the street. Occasionally I would bump into a good laugh. This would occur sometimes on Forty-Third Street near my club. I would feel the impact on my shoulder and turn round with the immediate "Oh, I beg your pardon," only to touch the soft nose of a traffic policeman's horse.

As a working author, it was tough to have to give up reading to myself. I have always loved books. I like the physical feel of them, to have and to hold. Moreover, words, as printed symbols, had a way of picturing themselves on my mental retina, whereas words as sounds went in one ear and out the other. I kept on reading to myself with strong magnifying glasses

as long as I could, and then . . . ? Why then, I employed people to read to me.

I used students at first, but not for long. Students, by and large, are not sufficiently practised in reading aloud. Their eyes had a way of skipping ahead of their voices so that their tardily spoken syllables lagged behind their visual interest and made no sense. They might just as well have been reading Chocktaw. In despair, I turned to young actors. This change proved highly successful. New York, except in wartime when the Army corners the supply, has apparently an inexhaustible population of "juveniles" ranging anywhere from eighteen years to say thirty-three, for even then, with a close shave and a little judicious talcum, some still try to qualify as post-adolescents.

These young men delighted in reading aloud. They would read for me "straight," "in character," in Oxford English, in Bronx, or Brooklynese. I had but to command. These actor lads brightened my years of shadow. They were much more fun than students and besides I found them more intelligent and much more charming as individuals. I think they enjoyed their job with me too. They needed to "exercise their tonsils" as one put it, and being actors without work they needed the money. But each and all of them gave me more than they received. I looked forward to the afternoons when they came to me. They brought sunlight into my twilight. They brought gaiety and friendliness.

Then too, I had the Talking Book. My heart overflows with gratitude to the Talking Book for the many dark hours which it made lighter for me. This invention, devised by the Amer-

ican Foundation for the Blind, the national agency in New York, with which my friend Helen Keller is so closely associated, consists of long-playing phonographic discs which are books in everything but conventional form. They used to come, these miracle discs, in cartons from the public library, and when I placed them on my reading machine, which looked much like a portable phonograph, they would start at the title page and read themselves aloud to me, each side of each disc running to some fifteen minutes of superb reading. I found I could get anything I wanted written in sound—biographies, textbooks, travel books, novels, and even acted plays. I could also get some of the "best sellers" about which my friends were talking. These books all travelled back and forth from the library postage free. The amazing thing about this service is that it doesn't cost blind people a penny. Most of these Talking Books are underwritten by the Library of Congress using a grant which the Federal Government makes each year for "reading for the adult blind," and as soon as they are recorded in the sound studios of the American Foundation for the Blind and at the American Printing House for the Blind, Louisville, Kentucky, the Library of Congress places them in 27 regional libraries which operate Departments for the Blind. In a short time, I forgot to think of the Talking Book as a mechanical contrivance. I accepted each one as it arrived as an individual book just as if it had come in inkprint, and let it work upon me its own individual magic.

THE thing which I found hardest of all to give up was ambition. It came hard, for at the time cataract began its sight-blurring course, the horizons of my personal panorama had begun to widen. The critics and the public both liked my first books; a great woman's magazine began to buy my short stories; former students of mine from the School of Journalism at Columbia University entering the professional field encouraged me in my teaching methods by achieving individual successes of their own; and women's clubs began to discover me as a lecturer.

Now, engaging in all these things depended on eyesight. To give out, I had constantly to take it. All too, in their very nature, implied nervous strain. I had to make my decision. Should I take Wolsey's advice and "fling away ambition?" I did, and when I did something happened that convinced me I had done the right thing. All tension seemed to snap; all worry seemed to depart. And, just as the old hymn has it, "peace like a



An Interpretation of Gogol

NIKOLAI GOGOL: By Vladimir Nabokov. New York: New Directions Books. 1944. 162 pp. \$1.50.

Reviewed by MANYA GORDON

NIKOLAI GOGOL, the great Russian realist, is not unknown to the American reading public. Before World War I "The Inspector General" was a favorite comedy on our college campuses, and "The Overcoat," "Taras Bulba," and "Dead Souls" were available in translation. Peter Kropotkin's "Ideals and Realities in Russian Literature," which has remained popular among discerning readers, contains an excellent chapter on Gogol. To be sure, he is not of one mind with Mr. Nabokov about "the pure realism" of this Slav genius who, according to Kropotkin, "was the first to introduce the social element into Russian literature." The poet Pushkin was the first of all Russian realists. Gogol was the first to bring the social trend into fiction.

Mr. Nabokov does not agree with the accepted interpretations of Gogol. He endeavors to prove that Gogol was neither humorist nor realist and that the so-called social aspect of his work is only the invention of sociological critics. It is a formidable task which leads the gifted author of this little volume into strange paths and many extravagances. At this point it is fitting that the reader should have at least a passing acquaintance with the author of "Nikolai Gogol." Mr. Nabokov is a man of high culture and a gifted poet in his own native Russian. He has written several novels and numerous short stories, some of them in English. He is a very good conversationalist and is not lacking in humor.

But for some inexplicable reason Mr. Nabokov informs his readers that he does not like humor: "The clown who appears in a spangled suit never seems as funny to me as the one who comes in wearing an undertaker's striped pants and a dickey." He insists that "had Pushkin lived to read 'The Overcoat' and 'Dead Souls' he would doubtless have realized that Gogol was something more than a purveyor of 'authentic fun.'" He will not agree that Gogol, like Dickens and other distinguished writers, could be funny and serious or tragic. Regionalism is another of Mr. Nabokov's aversions, and Gogol was an Ukrainian, although he wrote in Muscovite Russian.

Having thus created for himself four handicaps, namely, that Gogol was not a realist, that he was not the pioneer of the social element in Russian literature, that he was not a humorist as well as a tragic writer, and that in

some of his stories, "Taras Bulba" for example, he suffered from his Ukrainian locale, the author sets out to prove that Gogol was for other reasons a great genius. In order to accomplish his purpose with the material in hand Mr. Nabokov is compelled to resort to a bit of Freudism which he subsequently warns the reader not to take too seriously. Gogol's amazing characterization of the people whom his hero, Chichikov, meets in "Dead Souls" is thus lost in a maze of Freudian vapors and Mr. Nabokov's own lively fancy. In "The Overcoat" the deeply tragic fate of the poor clerk is merely mentioned while the author spends himself on excursions into the supernatural with the ghost of Akaky Akakievich. It is a valiant effort in which Mr. Nabokov's learning and skill are revealed to advantage, but in the opinion of the present reviewer the whole argument is beside the point.

Gogol was in fact deeply stirred by the poverty of his clerk and the tragedy of the lost coat, and he employed the local superstition only as an instrument of retribution. It is necessary to bear in mind that Gogol's Ukraine is the very cradle of the Slavic

folk tales, and also that Russian folk lore, whether it deals with ghosts or heroes, is always utilitarian. The sun-god in the fairy tale who courts the peasant widow's daughter warms, through a chink in the wall, the bath house for his prospective mother-in-law, and bakes her pancakes for breakfast in the same fashion. Death is perched on the thatched roof of a hut sharpening his scythe and explains to a passing peasant woman that he is preparing to decapitate the village butcher who shortweights his customers. One could go on indefinitely citing similar examples of realism in Russian folk tales. Consequently it is not at all singular that Gogol should have employed one of his own Ukrainian ghost tales or invented one, as Shakespeare used the ghost of Hamlet's father, in order to drive home his point against a callous bureaucrat. But whatever the purpose, Akaky Akakievich's ghost is not the part of the story that makes "The Overcoat" immortal. Gogol's genius is revealed in the deeply human description of the lives of the characters who people the story.

For all that, this little book is interesting as a new interpretation of Gogol and as an example of what a gifted writer may do with an impossible task.

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

BIRDS IN POETRY

Miss Harriet A. Tomson, of Topeka, Kansas, is the compiler of this week's quiz. You are to fill in the blanks in the quotations below with the names of birds. Allowing 5 points for each correct answer and another 2 if you can also identify the poem and its author, a score of 50 is par, 60 is very good, and 70 or higher is excellent. Answers are on page 27.

1. Thou,! in thy green array
Presiding Spirit here today.
2. Sweet sits on the bush,
Singing so rarely.
3. The clamorous, that all day
Above tree-tops and towers play.
4. And the plays but a boxwood flute,
And I love him best of all.
5. From their shadowy cots the white breasts peep
Of in a silver-feathered sleep.
6. To the 's way and the whale's way when the wind's like a
whetted knife. . . .
7. The moping does to the moon complain.
8. The chirped as if they still were proud
Their race in Holy Writ should mentioned be.
9.,
Spink, spank, spink.
10. Ere the first his matin rings.
11. As the secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold, I will build me a nest on the greatness of God.
12. The , though he's very shy, will sing a song for London.
13. While the sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!
14. The , still bravely singing, fly.
15. A single on the tree-top bleak
From his shining feathers shed off the cold sun.

river" enveloped me. Immediately I became a less interesting but much happier person.

Of course, flinging away ambition is easier said than done. I know now that I never really extinguished the fire, I merely banked it down for the duration of my night. In any case, this banking-down worked.

Naturally, one can't stop dead in one's tracks. A certain amount of "day labor light denied," had to go on. I found that I could still continue with perfect safety certain kinds of work. Unlike most newspaper men who achieve a strange unorthodox type-writer speed by picking and pecking, I had learned the touch system. Here no sight was needed, and consequently no strain on sight imposed. Accordingly I did keep on with some writing. In the early stages of the dimout I completed a book on self-education, "Give Yourself Background," which had and which continues to have an excellent sale. For this book, I had already done much of the preliminary research and planning. A few years later, with the help of my actor-readers, I achieved a textbook on writing, "How to Write and Sell Non-fiction." And then, to practise what I had preached, I embarked on a series of articles. Of course, I should have written a great deal more. Ever so many writers from Homer on have had bad eyesight yet turned out a terrific amount of copy. But much of the time I should have spent at my typewriter I spent in building up my morale against the day when I felt I would need all the morale I could muster.

I STARTED this business of morale building deliberately, and according to some of my friends, rather ruthlessly. They felt that way because in my desire to be self-sufficient I declined as far as possible to accept their generously proffered help. I had even to discourage Hendrik van Loon, who wanted to emboss his little sketches for me so that I could feel them. I knew I had to tackle a personal problem in a personal way. If friends actively began "feeling sorry" for me, and translated this feeling into physical and spiritual coddling, I knew that I would immediately begin to feel sorry for myself, which would be fatal. I wanted to forget, as far as possible, about the whole thing.

This desire naturally and inevitably led me into the realm of escape. I don't know what the psychologists say about escape as a morale builder. They probably will dub it "negative" at best. For my part I found it a positive aid. Like the housewife who wishes to forget her "dish-pan hands" and the dull monotony of the daily round, I turned on the radio at all hours. Radio, of

course, is a real boon to people who cannot see. It stands as the one main entertainment medium of the modern world which they can enjoy on the same terms and in the same way as their seeing contemporaries. For years I had taken radio or left it. Now I became a catch-as-catch-can listener, dialing the Metropolitan opera one day, and a soap opera the next. But whether the radio brought me its triumphs or its trash, it certainly brought me escape.

Each day, I spent hours in what I called my "constructive dream world." Here is where the psychologists will again get after me, but I don't care. From the beginning I knew what they would say and tried to forestall them. No, I didn't venture into the intoxication of "What I would do if I had a million dollars." Nor did I—although as a writer I had some justification—concoct a series of fiction plots. I seemed to feel that that way danger lay. No, my "constructive dream world" became largely architectural. I would build a house, a theatre, a village. I started first by mentally remodelling houses, theatres, villages that I knew, and then progressed to

original construction of considerable magnitude. These exercises did not stop at the blue print stage. They included the engineering, the plumbing, the wiring, the decorating, and, most important of all, the financing of each project. Despite rising costs and growing labor shortages, I managed to out-Kaiser Kaiser. "In the beginning was the Word." I begin to doubt it. My personal experience would lead me to believe that in the beginning was the Dream.

I got my lenses two months after the skill of Doctor Benjamin Rones of Washington, D. C.—to whom I had been sent by the Booth Tarkingtons—had given me back my sight. I put them on, marched out of the optician's shop, and turned north on Fifth Avenue. A flutter of gay color attracted me. I looked up. The Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes were waving there side by side. I could see, actually see, the crosses on the Jack, and the stars and bars on Old Glory. The two flags fluttered there together, their folds intertwining—a bright omen for the future of the bright new world I had now entered.

F. FRASER BOND.

Old Time Radical

AGAINST THE CURRENT. The Life of Karl Heinzen. By Carl Wittke. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1944. 342 pp. Index and illustrations. \$3.75.

Reviewed by F. C. WEISKOPF

ONE of the deeper reasons for the *Deutsche Misere* of today is to be found in the failure of the German revolution of 1848. The weakness and immaturity of the old Radicals and Republicans of those days—the thunderous *Achtundvierziger* with their love for romantic Hecker hats, beautiful oratory, and "pure radicalism"—are significantly mirrored in the personality and the life of Karl Heinzen who came over to this country after the end of the unsuccessful revolution in which he had played a very unsuccessful and quixotic role.

Dr. Carl Wittke, an expert in German-American history, has written the first full-length biography of this German immigrant who continued in the New World to carry on a violent crusade for his ideals of extreme republicanism, anti-bureaucratism, atheism, crude materialism, anti-militarism, anti-slavery. With a loving hand, Dr. Wittke draws the portrait of this eternal fighter "full of excessive ambition and frustrated plans . . . as stern as Cato, obstinate as Jackson, bitter and uncompromising as Benton" (to quote the characterization of a contemporary

fellow-newspaperman). The chapters on Heinzen's activities during the revolution of 1848 and the passages on his feud with Marx and Engels and other leaders of the German Left are rather sketchy and unsatisfactory; so is the part giving Heinzen's position during the Civil War. But the other chapters offer a wealth of valuable information about Heinzen and that whole group of German immigrants of the middle nineteenth century whose ideas and activities influenced broad spheres of American life in their time.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT: No. 85

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer to No. 85 will be found in the next issue.

VHCCADQL, CIXL NFC VAHDL

BIGD RI VDNLRL MFBNAADC.

—CNKHC VDQXMLLIF.—

LBIRRHLLW JQIKDQOL.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 84
LOSS OF A BELOVED CONNECTION AWAKENS INTEREST IN HEAVEN BEFORE UNFELT.

—BOVEE.

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THE SYMBOLS OF AMERICA

WHEN Huey Long was in the Senate, a reporter asked him, "Will America go fascist?" He is said to have answered, "Yes, but it will be called anti-fascism." He was not then at the height of his ambition, for that was nothing less than the Presidency of the United States. But he was the leader of what appeared to be a populist movement of hill-billies, poor whites, and, in general, the economically down-trodden of a large section of the South—with economic backing from the opposite direction. This was of course the approved fascist manner, as well as the grand manner, and it enabled him to dominate an increasingly large section of the country. In addition to maintaining a rule of personal law, he had the genius to invent slogans and symbols that appealed to the "underprivileged" American, which at that time was increasingly synonymous with the average American.

This is ancient history, but it is well to remember this demagogue and to recall his cynical, raucous voice shouting from his palace capitol, or, more inappropriately, from the floor of the Senate. All this is highly pertinent to recall today because we are approaching a time when democracy abroad may have to fight for its life in the midst of revolutions and civil wars, and it would be blindness to assume that we can escape untouched from a universal cataclysm.

At a public meeting of the Writers' War Board three weeks ago, Rex Stout, its president, said, "We are at the beginning, perhaps a little beyond the beginning, of the first fight between the authoritarian and democratic man for the control of this globe." The dictator's basic strategy has always been to exploit men's surface differences and prejudices. The

foreigners migrating from the next valley, or from another continent, and the religious and economic differences within—these are the tools of the tyrant of ancient time and the fascist of today. Mr. Stout believes that a myth threatens America, the myth that we are a white, Protestant race, though we have over thirteen million Negroes, and fifty-five and seven-tenths of our population are not Protestant.

Margaret Mead, a humanitarian and an anthropologist, did not agree with Mr. Stout that from man's earliest time the authoritarian and the democrat have been in conflict. The vital point, she said, is our habit to insist on the differences between man and man. She added eloquently, "the artist and the writer have got to stop following and begin to lead, for without new symbols, the people perish."

But if the moment in which we now live is so perilous, if this is really the grand entrance of world revolution and not the end of the Second World War that is to end all wars, we must rack our minds and question our hearts. What new symbols beside the symbol of the cross and of democracy? How can we abolish those racial and religious differences which are so obvious and so omnipresent and the realization of which are so dangerous? Miss Mead says that after three hundred years of racial intermarriage they may disappear and that we will have an American "type." That is a long time to wait for the disposition of an immediate danger. Are we to stop thinking and writing of differences and call everyone an unhyphenated American—blacks, browns, yellows, Jews, Catholics, Mormons, Protestants?

Is self-imposed censorship the answer? Would that solve the problem of the sharecropper, the tenant farmer, the hungry workman? Would it solve riots and lynchings in our own

country? Or should we attempt to show that these differences are on the surface only, and that the underprivileged are really not having a tough time of it at all. We can talk out of the sides of our mouths and describe them as fellows, all Americans, and good Rotarians at heart. Add that we always were a pretty undisciplined country, so that it doesn't really matter.

The tragedy, of course, is that, after a period of literary discernment and discretion, many writers are again reverting to outmoded stereotypes. For example, Roy Octavus Cohen's stories are again appearing in a national weekly, with those funny darkeys of his who are so hilariously trying to ape our civilization in their black slums. Novelists and cartoonists are attempting to prove that there is a lusty, inextinguishable, and bawdy good nature in the poorest white or back swamp and arid farm dweller, with their toothless grandpappy drooling over cornpone and grease and the children pot-bellied from malnutrition. Some of these books are written so ingeniously that the reader might think that the hookworm is a charming companion and moonshine a fine substitute for milk.

Let us have no more of censorship which hides but does not cure. Let us have no more of ridicule that transforms people's misfortunes into comedy. Let us drag our differences out into the light, analyze them, and try to make them less menacing. The spectacle of a country with one hundred thirty million and more people in it who had no vital differences would be too appalling to contemplate, too dull to live in. Let us make a virtue of our blessed differences, so long as they are not due to false economics or misgovernment. Let us delight in the magnificence of varied humanity. The symbols will take care of themselves.

H.S.

The Cry

By Starr Nelson

WHAT cry awoke the young somnambulist
He knew, but momentarily forgetting, stood
Breathless with running, in the black depths of a wood.
He heard the midnight ticking on his wrist,
And the loud whispering of leaves and feathers.
Something he knew was being told him here
In a forgotten language. By the electric fur
He saw what shapes drew near—his animal brothers.

When on the alembic rim of the forest stood
Bronze boy and tawny pard, and saw the sun
Blazon to history a glass-green plain
Where the limbs of men stirred in the wind of pain—
What cry awoke him, to what brotherhood,
He knew, who plunged into that burning blood.

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